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AUTHOR Leone, Christopher T.
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ABSTRACT

A functional model of person perception suggests that information seeking about other persons would increase as the prospect of interaction became imminent. Male (N=62) and female (N=42) college students responded to 3 hypothetical blind date situations by indicating which of 30 bipolar traits they would want to know about an immediate date, a future date, and a nondate control. Total number of traits indicated for each situation constituted the measure of information seeking. More information seeking was elicited by someone perceived as a date than someone perceived as a nondate. Males sought less information about an anticipated immediate date than about a future date. Females were equally likely to seek information about perceived immediate and future dates. More information was sought by males than females concerning the nondate control. (Author/NRB)

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Prospect of Future Interaction and Preference for Information About Blind Dates

by

Christopher T. Leone

Western Carolina University

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the theoretical and empirical work on person perception has been directed toward understanding the processes by which we infer the personal characteristics of others. This orientation has been productive in increasing our knowledge concerning the role of information seeking and attention in person perception. However, the factors that activate these cognitive and perceptual activities have received relatively little attention. The question of when social perceivers will be motivated to focus their attention and collect information about others is an important one. It is possible that the factors which initiate information seeking and attention also influence the direction these processes take as well as their final products (e.g., causal attributions).

When is an individual likely to be motivated to focus his/her attention and seek information about others? What purposes do these cognitive and perceptual acts serve? Most theorists agree that these and other processes, such as attributional analyses, function to allow perceivers to better understand the world around them and make it more controllable. For example, Heider (1958) assumed social perceivers attempt to identify the enduring traits of others in order to make their social environment more stable and predictable. Similarly, Kelley (1972) speculates that the "attribution process can be well understood only in the context of a comprehensive analysis of the exercise of control" (p.22). Other theorists (e.g., Berscheid & Graziano, 1979) have also suggested that social perceivers will be motivated to direct their attention towards and seek information about

others when that information seems to facilitate their effective control of the environment.

It follows from this line of reasoning that information seeking and attention will be activated when someone encounters a person in the environment who represents a real or potential problem of control. People on whom the perceiver's outcomes are dependent, i.e., people who have the ability to reward or punish the perceiver, are likely to be viewed as control problems. Perceivers should be especially motivated to seek information about and attend to such people.

Research by Ellen Berscheid and her colleagues (Berscheid, Graziano, Monson, & Dermer, 1976) supports this idea. They hypothesized that perceivers would be more dependent for their social outcomes on a person with whom they anticipated a date than someone with whom no date was anticipated (i.e., nondate). Their results indicated that anticipated dates elicited more attention and information seeking than did anticipated nondates. Outcome dependency appears to be one factor that activates information seeking and attention processes.

The prospect of interaction may be another factor that "fires up" the perceptual machinery involved in person perception. For most perceivers, there probably exists a number of persons who control social rewards and punishments for the perceivers. Given that the ability to simultaneously attend to a number of individuals is limited, such persons will compete for the perceivers' attention. The typical perceiver will not equally seek information about all persons on whom he/she is dependent. It seems reasonable to suggest that as the prospect of interaction with another becomes more imminent, perceivers

will become more motivated to focus their attention on and seek information about that person.

How would the prospect of interaction affect attention and information seeking? One possibility is that the prospect of interaction with another makes salient the need to exercise effective control. That is, as the prospect of interaction with someone becomes more imminent, perceivers become more concerned about the potential social rewards and punishments mediated by this person. Increased concern about someone on whom the perceiver is dependent should increase the perceiver's attempts to exercise effective control. As we previously suggested, attention and information seeking may be means of exercising control over the social environment. If this line of reasoning is correct, information seeking and attention will tend to increase as the prospect of interaction with reinforcing others becomes more imminent.

We choose to test these ideas in the context of college dating relationships. This topic was expected to be involving and interesting for students. College dating relationships were also thought to represent a problem of the prediction and control of important social rewards and costs. Additionally, dating situations typically vary in the degree of dependency involved as well as the immediacy of interaction.

Based on the reasoning previously outlined, the following predictions were derived. First, perceivers will be more motivated to exercise effective control over someone they expect to date than someone they do not expect to date. Consequently, perceivers were expected to engage in more information seeking about prospective dates than nondates.

Second, perceivers will be more concerned about effective control when dealing with someone they expect to date immediately than someone they expect to date sometime in the future. Therefore, perceivers should engage in more information seeking about an immediate date than a future date.

METHOD

Participants. A total of 96 male and 63 female introductory psychology students volunteered for a survey study concerning heterosexual dating. Participating partially fulfilled a course requirement. Data from 34 males (35%) and 21 females (33%) was either incomplete or indicated that the participants failed to follow the instructions. This data was omitted from the analysis. The remaining sample included 62 males and 42 females.

Procedure. Participants responded to three hypothetical dating situations that differed in the joint level of outcome dependency and prospect of interaction. Each participant responded to all three situations. The order of presentation of these situations was randomized across participants.

In the propsect of immediate interaction condition (i.e., immediate date), participants were instructed to imagine that they would have a "blind date" with someone that night, shortly after the experiment. In the prospect of future interaction condition (i.e., future date), participants were instructed to imagine that they would have a "blind date" with someone in the near future, approximately five days later. In the prospect of no interaction condition (i.e., nondate control) participants were instructed to imagine that circumstances had prevented a "blind date" with another person from occurring.

Following the description of each hypothetical situation was a list of 30 bipolar traits. Participants were instructed to indicate which of the traits they would consider useful to know about the immediate date, the future date, and the nondate control. The total number of traits indicated for each situation constituted the measure of information seeking.

RESULTS

To summarize the design, the independent variables were gender of participant (male vs. female) and prospect of interaction (immediate date, future date, nondate control). Prospect of interaction was a repeated-measures variable. The major dependent variable was the amount of trait information perceived as useful. Data were analyzed by a 2 (gender) x 3 (prospect of interaction) ANOVA. Because the study involved unequal sample sizes, an unweighted means analysis was performed (Keppel, 1973; Winer, 1971).

Recall our predictions. Participants will seek more information about dates than nondate controls. Additionally, participants would seek more information about immediate dates than future dates. Statistically, a significant main effect for prospect of interaction is predicted.

Gender x P.F.I. Unexpectedly, the ANOVA indicated a significant interaction between gender and prospect of interaction, $F(2,204) = 28.06$, $p < .0001$. For males, the test of the simple main effect for prospect of interaction was also significant, $F(2,204) = 7.00$, $p < .01$. The means are generally, although not completely, ordered as predicted. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that each mean differed significantly from the others. As expected, more information was sought about

immediate dates ($\bar{x}$ = 15.02) than the nondate controls ($\underline{x}$ = 13.21). Similarly, more information was sought about future dates ($\bar{x}$ = 16.44) than the nondate controls ($\bar{x}$ = 13.21). Contrary to our predictions, more information was sought about future dates ($\bar{x}$ = 16.44) than immediate dates ($\bar{x}$ = 15.02). The results for the male participants provided partial support for our predictions.

For females, the test of the simple main effect for prospect of interaction was also significant, $F(2,204) = 27.67$, $p < .01$. Again, the means are, for the most part, ordered as expected. Significantly more information was sought about immediate dates ($\bar{x}$ = 16.62) than nondate controls ($\bar{x}$ = 10.07). Additionally, significantly more information was sought about future dates ($\bar{x}$ = 17.10) than nondates ($\bar{x}$ = 10.07). Females sought slightly more information about future dates ($\bar{x}$ = 17.10) than immediate dates ($\bar{x}$ = 16.61). However, this difference did not approach statistical significance. The results for female participants can also be characterized as providing partial corroboration for our predictions.

Gender Differences. The differences between the responses of male and female participants was not expected and will be summarized briefly. Post-hoc comparisons revealed a significant difference between male and female responses to the nondate controls, $F(1,181) = 12.25$, $p < .01$. More information was sought by males ($\bar{x}$ = 13.21) than females ($\bar{x}$ = 10.07). Males and females also differed in their responses to the immediate dates. More information was sought by females ($\bar{x}$ = 16.62) than males ($\bar{x}$ = 15.02). This difference was only marginally significant, $F(1,181) = 3.25$, $p < .07$. Post-hoc comparisons showed no significant differences

between male ($\bar{x}$ = 16.44) and female ($\bar{x}$ = 17.10) responses to future dates.

DISCUSSION

As we predicted, perceivers were more likely to engage in information seeking about someone who was a potential problem of control than someone who was not. More information seeking was elicited by persons perceived as dates than persons perceived as nondates. Thus, outcome dependency (i.e., the ability of an individual to control the perceiver's social reinforcers) appears to be one factor that activates social information seeking. The results are consistent with a functional model of person perception. According to this model, cognitive and/or perceptual processes (e.g., information seeking) are seen as a means of exercising effective control over one's social environment.

The results did not corroborate our predictions concerning the effects of prospect of interaction. However, the data are not greatly inconsistent with the idea that information seeking, as well as other processes involved in person perception, are a means of exercising effective social control. Perhaps the prospect of immediate interaction (i.e., immediate date) is perceived as a largely uncontrollable encounter, since there is relatively little time to seek information and process that information efficiently. Conversely, the prospect of future interaction (i.e., future date) may be perceived as relatively more manageable. There is sufficient time to seek information when available without the constraint that the information be utilized immediately. If this were the case, we'd expect people to seek more information about future dates than immediate dates. This is, in fact

what occurred, at least for the male participants. Female participants did not seem to differentiate between immediate and future dates.

The gender differences observed in this study were not anticipated and are somewhat difficult to interpret. The major difference between male and female participants concerned their response to the nondate control. More information was sought by males than females. One possible explanation for this difference involves the nature of the nondate control. Recall that this stimulus person was described as someone with whom circumstances had prevented a date. Initiating a date traditionally has been more appropriate for males than females. Thus males may be more likely than females to perceive even the nondate as at least a potential date. If so, interpersonal information would have more utility for males than females. As a result, males would be expected to engage in more information seeking than would females.

In this study, the perceiver's attention was held constant while information seeking was allowed to vary. Since information seeking is, at least in part, dependent on attention. future research should be designed to assess the extent to which these processes covary. It is possible that some factors, such as the prospect of interaction, may have independent or even opposite effects on attention, information seeking and other processes involved in person perception.

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